



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Resources

Do you ever catch yourself thinking, “If there was just another hour or two in each day?” Most business owners find themselves short of time, moderately understaffed, and faced with the challenge of staying on the cutting edge of the multiple facets of running an enterprise. Farmers and ranchers share in these challenges while leading businesses that require them to become the ultimate jack-of-all-trades. They have wide-reaching knowledge and information needs spanning topics from grassland management to reproductive physiology to human-resource management to accounting. However, the stark reality is that none of us has enough time, talent or knowledge to cover all these bases.

Establishing priorities

The speed of technological change, uncertainty driven by chaotic global markets and excessive regulation, as well as the multiple variables that influence a cattle enterprise create an environment where managers are advised to conduct a strategic analysis to prioritize key information and knowledge needs, assess current capabilities, and identify the most critical gaps. A methodical approach protects against the tendency to get overwhelmed by the volume of information when we tackle too many questions or projects simultaneously.

The Priorities First study funded by the American Angus Association several years ago provides a solid framework of topic areas identified by successful ranchers and their advisors as most critical to sustaining profitability and assuring longevity of the business. The seven highest-priority areas of management identified in the study were nutrition, pasture and range, herd health, financial, marketing, production systems and genetics. While each of these topics can be studied in great detail within a silo approach, a more useful protocol is to develop a deeper understanding of the interrelationships amongst these variables and the manner in which they function as a system.

A focused process

To develop a systems approach while seeking innovative solutions requires assembling a focused process to assure continued learning while building a highly competent and diverse professional network,

and identifying the most reliable and high-return information resources. My experience has taught me a few fundamental concepts that have enhanced how our team makes use of the information and technology resources within our grasp.

- Innovative solutions come from the joint imagination and experiences of several people, so don't learn in isolation.
- There is too much information for one person to absorb, so spread the responsibility for specific topic areas to your team members (don't forget spouses and teenage children) and then take time for cross-teaching and discussion. Once you have identified the gaps or the key focus areas for learning, consider assigning each member of your team one or more of the topics, and then make it part of their accountability to the team to become the resident authority. Provide resources.
- Build relationships with beef and industry “nerds” (I see one in the mirror every morning). There are professionals available who make it their life's work to seek knowledge and then package it into valuable information. Some of these folks work in for-profit organizations where a fee is involved, while others work in the public domain. I have found both sources to be invaluable. Make it a goal to build a relationship with at least one staff person from the American Angus Association, a beef extension specialist, a market analyst, a veterinarian and a staff person from your state cattlemen's organization.
- Don't overlook obvious sources of information — read the *Angus Journal*, the *Angus Beef Bulletin* and spend time

on www.angus.org and www.certifiedangusbeef.com. Both provide up-to-date detailed information focused on your success. Watch *The Angus Report* on RFD-TV and tune in to *Angus Talk* radio. As commercial cattlemen, we have found that these resources provide us information we can put to use immediately while also priming our “intellectual pump” to consider new approaches and to view our problems and challenges through different sets of lenses.

- Survey the broader resources available from the industry and pick several magazines, newsletters, blogs or other sources that will be most useful to your business. The risk in this process is to choose too many. Remember, we are constrained by time, so your list must be tailored to fit your specific needs. Keep in mind that your network of “nerds” will be reading broadly and that you can assign various information sources specifically to your in-house team.
- Solutions are born in the intersection of ideas. Thus, it is a key task for the leaders of any organization to be diligent in reading and seeking knowledge from beyond their specific enterprise and industry. I have found inspiration and the fuel for solutions from the chronicles of history and literature. Sources such as the *Harvard Business Review* provide insight from the captains of industry and great business thinkers such as Tom Peters, Seth Godin and Malcolm Gladwell provide out-of-the-ordinary insight and concepts.

Finally, leaders of enterprises must schedule time to work on the business so that there is protected time to focus on learning, strategy and innovation. Sustainable businesses are those that embrace learning and make discovery a central tenet of the organization.

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